

"Cleaning in the Nude." With this small ad in 1999 on the website of the *Kronen Zeitung*, probably Austria's most popular daily newspaper, Gelitin slipped back onto the stage of the art scene—through a hidden door. First they came as "Ohrensausen," and in 1994, as art activists in and around Krems on the Danube, they made a splash with "Hip Hop Jam" and "Dosen WM." Wolfgang Gantner was there, as was Florian Reither—the very first "Gelitins." At the time they were called "Les New Petits." With the addition of Tobias Urban and Ali Janka the line-up was complete—in its present form. There were still a few incarnations to go through before they arrived at "Gelitin"—namely "Blofeld," "Les Bubbles Gelatin," and "20228-000042945." And as far as the name itself is concerned: in Ali's studio there was an intriguing, pungent smell, "very noticeable, but impossible to locate"—almost the perfect description of the group.¹⁾ Rather late in the day the culprit was found to be a "Gelatine-Wurst." And a slip by a Korean stamp-maker led to the spelling of the name "Gelitin." It was on their trip to the Biennale in Gwang Ju in 2002 that the portentous incident occurred: the stamp-cutter made a mistake in his calligraphy, and instead of "Gelatin" the stamp read "Gelitin." And that's how it stayed—no-one wanted to just throw the stamp away.

Gelitin is all about pachydermal corporeality and staged moments, even if these should leave behind the remnants of an installation or even art for the art market. They are not an Actionist group like their colleagues three generations before them.²⁾ With their radical individualism, they take possession of the art settings that they play in with such bravura—art fairs, art galleries, the exhibitions circuit, and the art shells that are our museums. Gelitin is even less fond of the directors of those museums than they are of art dealers. It seems to them that their art functions more effectively in the hands of the latter than

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Inspiring **DECADENCE**

HERBERT LACHMAYER

under the aegis of art institutions. As a production strategy, the four protagonists resist adopting either roles or identities—which allows them to retain a degree of anonymity at art events. This then allows them to appear bluntly, artificially, spontaneous. This also makes room for more sexual physicality, more embarrassment, unbearably so for the elite aesthetes who want to take on board and download the cultural content. Gelitin makes a beeline for muck, feet first into any filth; the greenish ooze of a Venetian canal is an invitation to jump in. Of course

there's an element of provocation here. Obsessions surface, with an intense pursuit of freedom bursting out all over. And they are admirably consistent in these aims; no way are the media going to sap the energy of their "cosmos of the moment," which is what sets them apart from the rest. Just one example: they flatly refused to do the interview with Arte television that a certain museum director wanted from them. And this has nothing to do with posing or being arrogant—it was just that the idea had triggered the alarm on their production-magic safety device. As their group-career takes off, the delirious borderline of their artistic production strategies is at greater risk than ever before from the schematic demands of public art presentations. There was a time when the wizardry of staging the present was still a Situationist possibility. Like Franz West, they refuse to be seduced by a high-gloss career fetish. To be in thrall to such allure, cripples artistic creativity and makes the artist's life flat, bleak.

"Delirious" has its origins in *de linia ire*—"to be off one's track," to cross a line, to leave it altogether. Having grown into this waywardness, Gelitin scarcely fits the mold of the outsider avant-gardist who accounted for most of modern art in postwar Austria. As far as the history of dominant mentalities goes, this amounts to a successful bid to sidestep the role of "romantic artistic genius" squeezing "droplets of truth" from his internalized suffering and using them to create artistic anti-worlds. This description even fits the leading lights in the Wiener Gruppe, who—striving to improve Central Europe—still dreamt of creating masterworks.³⁾ In any case, Gelitin comes from a different generation; they have a deep-seated mistrust of the inner authority of such mastery—a fact that did not escape Reinhard Priessnitz even then. Artists no longer need to produce a certificate of suffering; there are clear limits to Gelitin's interest in syncope. Hence we cannot dismiss the speculative notion that Gelitin has more in common with the "inspiring decadence" of the late eighteenth century than with the avant-garde critique-pathos of aging modernism—especially in view of the fading backdrop of our corroding ideological horizons. After all, Postmodernism needed its discourses first and foremost so that it could choose to

regard Modernism as done and dusted—as though it were through these discourses that Modernism had been relegated to the past, that's to say, poured into the mold of a scheme that would shape it into a tradition that had run its course. Despite this, however, the era of Postmodernism also saw the relativization and finalization of the by now routine content-ideologisms. And it was this corrosive atmosphere that gave rise to the productive vacuum that was to nurture Gelitin.

The frivolous self-styling of Gelitin as actively decadent gives them stature and sets them apart from art markets, art consumers, television journalists, museum directors, curators, and other artists. It has an air of libidinous stimulation, seduction techniques, experimental fanciful individuality, modulated affect, and in more general terms, an air of a " pornosophic, rebellious" enlightenment.⁴⁾ The late eighteenth century knew nothing of the super-ego society or the guilt society; bourgeois identity drudgery was yet to determine the internal constructs of the non-aristocrats amongst the nobility of enlightened absolutism. By no means suggesting an analogy, but—as Baudelaire would have said—*en correspondance*, in our own two-tier meritocracy there most certainly is an element of "management absolutism," albeit not of an especially enlightened variety. The cynical struttings of the still officiating macho-male-man with turbo ego have a limited shelf life, at least readily apparent to the psycho-social observer with intelligent taste. The aforesaid species may no longer seem consumable to Gelitin. The blatantly impudent obscenity of their art induces neither lust nor even a lust for reflection amongst these men-folk in the pleasant company of their good ladies. And so it would seem that Gelitin is sailing close to the Rococo-nihilism of this rebellious Enlightenment—where there's nothing left to rescue, people aren't on the lookout for redemption. With full-blooded reserve, and within the framework of polymorph-perverse lasciviousness, the sheer presence of their art spawns the obsessive search for freedom of a new individualism. A libidinous escapade compounded by sublimated eccentricity progressively becomes a performative act. Taking this as their guiding principle, Gelitin scintillates with sponta-



GELITIN, TRUE LOVE IV, 2002, installation view/
WAHRE LIEBE IV, Installationsansicht, Gwangju
Biennale, South Korea.

neous elegance. Collaged trash looks more like translucent poesy. Their frivolous demeanor harbors within it un-courtly gallantry.

In the act of art Gelitin is all attention. Artistic productivity and the unmelodious concept of reception are more closely related than some would dare to presume in certain art-critical debates—Gelitin demonstrates this, and an equally present public thanks them for doing so. The frameworks and conditions of presenting art appear increasingly reinforced by the media; this invites mistrust. However, there are no holds barred when it comes to Gelitin-strategies, the tests posed are invariably countered with a bang—although this is by no means always audible. In that sense, Gelitin has been blessed with a capacity for both passionate engage-

ment and sensual reflection. Unfazed by the present discourse, they enjoy said intelligent taste, which bespeaks their own ironic way of life. By comparison, lifestyle is dull and always too little, for the recipients, too. With their innate mobility, Gelitin's members could be described as psychonautical flaneurs in a world of deviant sensibilities. From flaneur to *parvenu*—the small step that so many art managers cannot resist taking. All too often, superiority ensues. What counts is obsessiveness, for without it it's impossible to relate properly to the reality of our own time.

So Gelitin packs the professional scenarios of the aforementioned parameters with a display of freedom that is both trenchant and ruthless—in effect it hardly leaves any room for the public. Which is exactly what people expect of Gelitin; people want to be fully there, and to be squeezed out by the art event. It stimulates the senses. Ugly things aren't suddenly made to pander as symbolism, so that they are easier to take. And Gelitin stands by the fact that they owe their resistance to myths to a kind of "negative aura." In this atmosphere it is pleasingly possible to avoid aesthetic behaviors coming willy nilly to light as emblems. Nor is grime emblematically appropriated. Gelitin wallows for real—uncoily disgusting. With medicinally induced priapic erections they configure an evening in the Galerie Emmanuel Perrotin in Paris; in Salzburg the "Arc de Triomphe"—a grand gesture of the phallic kind—incites the expected scandal. Once again their strategic provocation has come off in the right social context, in this case catching the eye of the Salzburg Festival audience.

The challenging gesture—as provocation—has almost disappeared from contemporary art, nor is it suited to be an ornament. And just citing provocation, particularly artistic provocation, can smack of a never-to-be-repeated moment of arousal, quite boring. Certain aspects of Viennese Actionism were designed to be mythologized, not least in order to secure the protagonists' future in the history of art. Not so in the case of Gelitin. The traces of their activities linger on solely as trash and not as myths in which the important excremental extremism is celebrated in the superlatives of exaggeration, which instantly relativizes it and renders it odorless.



GELITIN, LES INNOCENTS AUX PIEDS SALES

(The Innocents with Dirty Feet), 2005 /

DIE UNSCHULDIGEN MIT DEN DRECKIGEN

FÜSSEN, Performance, Galerie Emmanuel Perrotin, Paris.

Arousal is always important to Gelitin. Broadly speaking, the arts are weary of modeling affects, and feel that all they can actively do is be cool. However, aesthetic lusts and lustings need acutely reflective inspiration—particularly these days, when there is such a lack of *passionable* thinking, the kind that is innately imaginative and not beholden to a set of abstract rules. The crystalline and the fluid, abstraction and sensualism connect intimately at certain points; they have to be able to squelch and crackle in the process.

Gelitin didn't come bearing words, and yet it emanates a far-reaching, conversational atmosphere. At the same time, it has no truck with the discourses that are incessantly polished until the veneer of sensualism is all worn away. And not to ruin the metaphor, a bizarre streak of reason in Gelitin's aesthetic demeanor has taken on a highly libidinous form—with bare skin, hair growth and yet sweat-free. Inspired by the cultural notion of pre-disciplinary conversation, which was imbued with a respectful élan that did not talk art to pieces, the question arises: How much discourse can an aesthetic feeling withstand, and—most importantly—which? In radical Situationism even Kantian reason may appear transcendental and lascivious; the stuff of affect may be imaginatively talked into making a libidinous appearance somewhere between *phenomenon* and *nuomenon*, although one is only too aware that there is no permanent sense of security on either side.

Freedom consists of both imagining and perceiving ambiguity. It may be that, speaking psychotechnically, the secret of subversion lies in this self-construction. This is also the source for artists like Gelitin, of an ever-vital self-awareness that gives them the strength to resist the idea of having found themselves, existentially, as definitive artist personas. In the late eighteenth century there was a positive flowering of fascination and experimentation with the self-invention of the individual. The artistic and social creativity generated by the “inspiring decadence”⁵⁾ of that era has given rise to the notion of a *début de siècle* around 1800—comparable to the cultural divide that came with the *fin de siècle* around 1900. This still leaves the lost question as to the inspiring decadence of 2007. Operating exactly within this question, Gelitin is indubitably state of the art.

(Translation: Fiona Elliott)

1) Florian Reither in conversation.

2) The Viennese Actionists: a group of artists in Vienna in the 1960s and 70s, who took up and provocatively applied the ideas of American Happenings and Fluxus art. The main protagonists were Günter Brus, Otto Mühl, Hermann Nitsch, and Rudolf Schwarzkogler.

3) See Oswald Wiener, *Die Verbesserung Mitteleuropas* (Reinbek: Rowohlt Verlag, 1969).

4) The author has gratefully absorbed these terms in conversation with the philosopher Ursula Pia Jauch.

5) See Herbert Lachmayer, “Genie in Verwandlung. Mozarts künstlerische Produktivität in Parallelwelten,” in idem, *Mozart, Experiment Aufklärung* (Osterildern: Hatje-Cantz Verlag, 2006).